

**Testimony Supporting S.B. No. 476- An Act Concerning the Academic  
Achievement Gap  
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I support S.B. No. 476, particularly the extension bilingual education from the current 30 month limit to 60 months. Additionally, I urge the consideration of further legislation, or expansion of the language in the current bill, to more clearly define bilingual education, exempt ELLs from high-stakes testing for 30 months, and require that the CT State Department of Education (CSDE) commit to holding districts accountable for implementation.

As an ELL and TESOL certified educator, I can attest to the fact that there are countless factors that influence an individual's ability to learn a new language. All things considered, the most thorough research shows that it takes at least seven years for students to reach academic language proficiency (see sources below). A key factor that all educators and policy makers must understand in order to effectively educate our growing population of ELLs (and consequently impact the achievement gap) is the difference between academic and social language.

New arrivals can achieve functional social language as early as within their first sixth months, allowing them to interact with peers. However, the trench between being able to hang out with English speaking friends and being able to perform academically at grade level is vast. As an educator, I've experienced having to administer high-stakes standardized assessments to ELLs who have been in this country for 13 or more months (as current policy requires). This requirement illustrates the enormous disconnect between research and policy. I have seen students nearly in tears as they attempted to make sense of the information in front of them, others who acted out hoping to be removed from the room to avoid facing the sea of foreign words that lay ahead, and some who listen carefully to the directions then proceeded to use the testing materials as a pillow. Of course, there were also many who never came to the testing room at all by purposely being absent on test days, and negatively affecting their attendance records.

With the growing mandates and focus on standardized testing as content area assessments, there has to be a different requirement for students who do not demonstrate proficiency on the LAS Links. It is cruel and unusual punishment to subject students to high-stakes assessments that they, by definition (ELL) are not competent in. Not to mention, if money is scarce for all educational endeavors, I can't think of a bigger waste of money than the time and materials that we spend on yielding invalid data. Therefore, it is important that the time in which ELLs can receive bilingual education (which should specifically require native language support, and at least a good-faith effort on districts' parts to provide such support in low-incidence languages) is increased from the current 30 months to 60 months, and that students who have not reached proficiency not be required to participate in high-stakes testing (at least a 30 month exemption).

The CSDE has abandoned its responsibility of overseeing implementation of bilingual education in our state by reducing the number of consultants responsible for ensuring compliance from 10 people to 1 single person in the past few years. The

effects of this lack of oversight have been devastating, particularly in lower-income communities with large ELL populations. Districts such as Hartford, Windham, and New Britain have taken advantage of this lax accountability system by eliminating comprehensive bilingual programs in favor of vaguely defined supports, or non-research-based methodologies that promote an English-only approach, yet lead the CSDE to believe that these districts are in compliance.

For example, New Britain once boasted model bilingual education, often observed to be emulated by other districts. They offered bilingual programs in Polish and Spanish, where students learned core subjects with native language support, as well as received direct English language instruction in vocabulary and grammar (ESL courses). I watched the bilingual program, specifically at the high school, dwindle over the past 7 years as bilingual Spanish and Polish teachers either retired or were non-renewed, and were never replaced. ESL courses continued, but native language support was minimized, and now only exists in a few Spanish bilingual math courses (which not all qualifying students are enrolled in). Most recently, they have eliminated bilingual education throughout the district, and replaced it with English Language Development (ELD) – a grammar-based English only approach that has proven problematic in other states, and even been outlawed in one community (see sources below). On paper, however, a comprehensive bilingual program exists, providing misleading information when low standardized test data is analyzed. In terms of addressing the achievement gap, relying on districts self-reporting compliance with the bilingual education statute, and relying on test data that includes the performance of students who have barely acquired social language skills to evaluate student achievement is simply erroneous and counterproductive.

Passing S.B. No. 476 would certainly be a step in the right direction for our growing population of ELLs, and truly addressing the achievement gap. Thank you to all that have listened to educators, parents, and other constituents for putting this forth. However, we have to ensure that this bill does not become another piece of unenforced legislation. Further recommendations:

- Clearly define bilingual education as containing adequate native language support at all grade levels, with evidence of districts' effort to provide support in low-incidence languages
- Specify that English language immersion programs are NOT bilingual education, as CT is not an English-only state
- Exempt ELLs from high stakes standardized testing (with the exception of LAS Links which specifically measures language proficiency) for a minimum of 30 months

## References

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The Education of English Language Learners in Arizona: A History of Underachievement

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